Event Gets the Word Out

Disabilities Day Conference give locals info on special services

Today's Sunbeam Friday, July 21, 2006 By Christopher Weir Staff Writer

Pennsville Twp. – Thanks to the Second Annual Disabilities Day Conference, area residents now have a better idea on how to obtain aid in the county.

Over 200 People filled the Riverview Inn Thursday for the informative event that included speakers and booths with a variety of information for people living with a disability.

Salem County Office of the Disabled Department Director Debra Behnke organized the event and spoke of the importance of the day.

"There was a need to connect people to the services available to them in Salem County," Behnke said. "The whole point is to get the word out about what's availabled to them and to help them connect the dots easier."

Behnke said the Office of the Disabled has grown a lot in recent years and said the Salem County freeholders are a big reason for that.

"The fact that the Salem County Board of Chosen Freeholders is collectively supportive of the issue of people with disabilities in itself is a very important thing," Behnke said.

Freeholder Director Lee Ware spoke in praise of Behnke's work in the community and presented her with a disability resolution on behalf of the freeholders.

"We are in this together and we will work to make sure that no one gets left behind," Ware said.

Assemblyman John Burzichelli, D-3rd Dist., also praised Behnke and the people who work to help those in need in the county.

"This program has come so far so quickly because of people who care," Burzichelli said.

"Everyone has abilities. Our role is to help one another so that we can take out abilities as far as they can go and help a person to be as successful as they can be."

County Sheriff John B. Cooksey announced a new county program called Project Life Saver, which will be initiated in the county and used to track challenged individuals who are prone to wandering off.

"They've found that individuals not located within the first 24 hours will often die, become injured, or become the victim of predators," Cooksey said.

Individuals who fit certain qualifications will be given a bracelet that contains a tracking device so that they can be located if they wander away. Cooksey said each bracelet costs around \$300 and that they rely on donations to fund the program.

"Our goal is to give it to anyone who is in need of one," Cooksey said.

Salem County United Way Coordinator Rebecca Purchase spoke Thursday about the 2-1-1 information system, which is a new United Way telephone number available to people in the state.

Purchase said that the number is in operation 24 hours, 7 days a week and can assist people during disasters as well as in their daily lives for assistance for things such as how to obtain food.

Joan Cole spoke about One Stop Career Center located on West Broadway in Salem. Cole said the center will help the disabled as well as other individuals who are looking for work or looking to improve their education.

"We will help anyone who comes to us," Cole said.

Included among many information booths was information pertaining to senior transportation programs, the Office of the Disabled, college guides, guides to handicapped parking, Meals on Wheels, the Alzheimer's Association, and Child Health Services.

Those in attendance were impressed with the program and the information they received.

Judy Shaw of Pittsgrove said the best part of the program is that she learned about the One Stop Program.

"I've been looking for work and I didn't know that program was available," Shaw said. "We just don't make enough on disability."

Shaw gets around in a wheelchair after having parts of her leg amputated due to diabetes.

Skip Kite of Elsinboro was browsing through the information booths and said he found the event helpful.

"I thought it was very good," Kite said. "Having the vendors here at the booths was the best part. Getting to talk on a one-on-one basis and being able to ask specific questions was very helpful."

Norma resident Tye Ruth Johnson, who uses either a walker or wheelchair to maneuver, also praised the program.

"I love it," Johnson said. "The whole program was just beautiful and very educational. I learned a lot."

Johnson was carrying a bag full of brochures with her and said the most interesting thing she learned was about the 2-1-1 help-line number.

Mental Health Administrator Dr. Isaac Young was the master of ceremonies for the event and said he was pleased with the amount of people in attendance.

Behnke said she was also pleased with the success of the program and plans on continuing with Disabilities Day in the future.

"I think it's gone very well," Behnke said. "We'll continue to improve upon it next year and make it even bigger."

For more information about services available for the county's disabled, contact the Salem County Office of the Disabled at 935-7510 ext. 8316.